

A reply to the RCO

Road to party

We appreciate comrades of the Revolutionary Communist Organisation (RCO) taking the time to respond to our criticisms laid out in *Red Battler* No. 2 (Summer 2024/25). Anthony Furia's article ("Party first, then split the class," *Partisan!* No. 7) is correct to highlight many of the real and deep problems that have plagued the left for decades. In particular, we concur with his assessment of the left as "a fragmented, disorganised mess" whose combined social weight is dwarfed by the Laborite behemoth. For decades the left has dwindled and splintered and now, on the precipice of major world shocks, stands confused and isolated. To repel further blows it is imperative that there is a fight to, as Furia says, "[clean] up our own backyard" and change course. The question is, *how?*

Breaking down the sectarian barriers that exist on the left is critical, from struggling for united-front efforts to engaging in discussion and debate for the sake of programmatic clarification. Fundamentally, however, breaking the left from its fractured and weak state requires breaking with the strategy that has led us to this juncture. As Furia's article puts it, it requires a fight for the "reunification of the communist left *on a revolutionary program*" (our emphasis). We agree. Only on this foundation can we build a party capable of breaking the working class from Laborism. However, the RCO fails to live up to these words. While recognising the crisis facing the left, the RCO fails to put forward a program that can fight for a way out. In fact, they repeat many of the same mistakes that have haunted the rest of the left, including our own tendency until recently. *This* is the "stark distinction" between our strategies which this exchange illuminates.

So, what is the source of the disorganised state of today's left? The past three decades have been characterised by the hegemony of the American empire, with its ideological bedrock in post-Soviet liberalism. The Australian ruling class adopted this ideology as its own, using it to justify their attacks on the workers movement—further putting the unions in a straitjacket while overseeing the continued deindustrialisation and privatisation of key industries. Far from fighting this course, the Laborite union leaders were firmly hitched to it. Dragged through the mud by "leaders" incapable of fighting for their interests, workers began to leave the unions *en masse*. The resulting state of the workers movement is self-evident.

The left too adopted this liberalism. Most of them tailed the "left" wing of the labour bureaucracy. Often they went

even further, colouring themselves Green in their pursuit of alliances with liberal elements. Others on the left clung to empty revolutionary rhetoric and doctrinal purity while doing nothing to break the working class from this trajectory (as was the case with our tendency before reorientation). Thus, the left tied themselves to forces subordinate to the ruling class or had nothing to offer in counterposition. Consequently, workers repelled by the liberal order and its labour lieutenants did not see the left as an alternative but rejected them along with it. The rump of the workers movement remained solidly shackled to the Laborite misleadership that allowed this to happen in the first place.

The result of all of this is a fragmented left, cannibalised over the course of decades. This trend has only accelerated in the face of a rapidly changing world in which right-wing populism is in ascendance. The disorganised and splintered state of the left is not the result of mere sectarianism (although that is certainly a big contributor), neither is it just an organisational question. It is a symptom of programmatic bankruptcy. "Cleaning up our own backyard" means fighting for a break with the leaders who have dragged us down this path. This will not and cannot be achieved with high-sounding words against Laborism but by putting forward, at each juncture, a strategy and perspective to advance the interests of workers and the oppressed, demonstrating concretely the superiority of our revolutionary strategy to that of the Laborites. This demands a program that facilitates just this, that acts as a *guide to action*—assimilates the lessons of yesterday, assesses the balance of class forces today, outlines the obstacles and puts forward tasks accordingly. In other words, a revolutionary program. It is this we have sought to put forward in "The Breakdown of U.S. Hegemony & the Struggle for Workers Power" (*Spartacist* No. 68, September 2023) and the programmatic documents included in both issues of *Red Battler*.

This doesn't mean, as Furia argues, that we have illusions that the workers movement will magically flock to our banner *en masse* by virtue of a "sacrosanct 'correct line' and program." Neither does it mean "putting the cart far before the horse," ignoring the rest of the left in favour of going "directly to the masses"—or doing "entryism into Labor" for that matter. In fact, the fight for revolutionary regroupment (as with the SL/A and Bolshevik-Leninist fusion) and engagement with others on the left has been central to our recent work, as we are sure RCO members will recall in light of our recent joint united-front actions. What we are arguing

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In the January edition of 'Red Battler', the publication of the Spartacist League in Australia, two articles mention and mount a critique of the Revolutionary Communist Organisation (RCO). The first (titled "Abolish the monarchy! For a workers republic!") is a reproduction of a speech given by one comrade C. Bourchier at a speak-out organised by the RCO against the king's visit in October, which criticises the RCO for supposedly "falling in behind the ALP" due to our Queensland election statement, and alleged refusal to fight for the leadership of the working class. The second article (titled "CFMEU takeover: "What the f**k happened?") is a critique of the RCO's 'intervention' into the Defend the CFMEU movement, based on a misunderstanding of our aims when engaging with such a movement. Both articles illuminate a stark distinction between the strategy of the RCO and the Spartacist League. A distinction that, in responding to these critiques, can be illustrated clearly and directly, instead of being danced around haphazardly.

C. Bourchier in their speech on the need for a republic alleges that the RCO falls short of establishing the need for revolutionary republicanism due to our failure to recognise the main enemy as the 'current leadership of the working-class movement'. Supposedly, this is illustrated in our Queensland election statement, where the RCO encourages communists to preference Labor and the Greens above the LNP in areas where there are no socialist candidates running.

This should not be a controversial position to hold – the Spartacists themselves have consistently accused the RCO of 'revolutionary phrase-mongering', so why the fuss when we offer a concrete approach to the election? Because it interferes with the current project of the Spartacists: entryism into Labor and the ACTU to force a split. Regardless of whether directing our 30-odd Queensland members to pre-

From the RCO's *Partisan!* No. 7 Party first, then split the class

by Anthony Furia

ference Labor ahead of the LNP is significant in bolstering the power of Labor over the working-class movement (it isn't), what is betrayed here is the Spartacist strategy. That is, their belief that, in going directly

to the (organised) masses in terms of the unions and 'working class movement' of Labor, presenting them with the sacrosanct 'correct line' and program, they can build themselves a communist party by splitting the working class from Labor.

This, in addition to being wholly typical of a Trotskyist sect, is putting the cart far before the horse. With what cohered communist forces will the Spartacist League intervene into Labor? With what mass base of organised cadres and workers? None. The Spartacist League, an organisation of at most 50 or so active members (this is a generous guess), aims to split the leviathan Labor Party through intervention with a 'correct theoretical program'. When first approached with an offer by the Spartacist League to conduct joint work on this project of Labor interventionism, we were, to say the least, perplexed. The Australian communist left is a fragmented, disorganised mess. Yet we were supposed to break the working class from Labor, from a bourgeois workers party with immense capital and bureaucratic control, before cleaning up our own backyard? This seemed not only tactically impossible but strategically unwise.

It is entirely possible that the Spartacist League will gain, or perhaps even already has gained, members and fellow travelers thanks to this intervention. There is no doubt that there are communists and workers within and around Labor who desire organisation and direction, and there should be a coherent response to this from the communist left in Australia. The RCO should indeed be seeking, when it can, to organise cells within Labor and around it – in unions controlled by it, and branches with communists in them.

is that it is only on the basis of struggling to advance the interests of the class and break it from its liberal-Laborite misleadership that we can cohere the forces in the left and workers movement necessary to do so. It is precisely because the RCO rejects this perspective that they see-saw between grand (but empty) proclamations against the Laborite leadership and latching on to these very leaders when offering a "concrete approach." The two examples comrade Furia takes up—the 2024 Queensland elections and the takeover of the CFMEU—are indicative.

Take for instance the state takeover of the CFMEU. The RCO and the SL/A both recognised that the union needed to be defended. Both were also quick to criticise the CFMEU leadership. But where we diverge is precisely on how we took on said leadership. In the face of openly union-busting moves by the state, most militant workers believed that the CFMEU leadership would "shut the city down" and fight to the bitter end. The SL/A sought to demonstrate that confronting the Labor government was contrary to the very core of the CFMEU leadership's Laborite program, and that in fact this leadership constituted the main obstacle to defending the union. Not only did we say this, we fought for CFMEU workers to take the initiative and fight for a class-struggle defence of their union, which could have drawn a line and exposed which side the union bureaucrats were really on. This offered a path forward to advance the class and dispel

in practice the illusions workers had.

In contrast, the RCO penned plenty of fine words calling to defend the CFMEU and declaring their desire for revolution. But when it came to showing why revolutionary leadership was critical *at that moment* to defend the CFMEU? Nothing! Instead, the RCO substituted little more than a wagging of the finger at the CFMEU leadership for being corrupt and class-collaborationist. That is all fine and dandy, but CFMEU militants do not have illusions in their leadership because they think they oppose class collaboration, or because they see them as being squeaky clean. They have illusions that the strategy of the CFMEU leadership is one that can advance or at least defend their conditions. At the critical moment that meant believing Setka, Ravbar and Smith would defend the CFMEU as a whole from state attack. If you do not fight to expose these beliefs, you are leaving CFMEU members in the hands of the very bureaucrats who handed the union over to the state administration.

As for last year's Queensland elections, in which the RCO called for "preferencing the Greens and Labor ahead of all other candidates" (*Partisan!* No. 3), Furia opines "why the fuss when we offer a concrete approach to the election?" The answer is simple. The federal Labor government backed by their Queensland counterparts had just enacted one of the biggest attacks on the working class in generations. They showed themselves to be open servants of the bosses,

But this cannot be the central basis of our strategy when we are wholly devoid of a unified communist party; of a communist left capable of cohering itself and preparing for a break with Laborism.

This same common organisational error of emphasising a particular tactic (intervention into Labor) and elevating it to a strategic level (splitting the Labor party) is repeated in the second critique elevated against the RCO. Based on our 'intervention' into the CFMEU struggle, the first paragraph of this critique (not the first paragraph of the article) is semantic. Such a paragraph argues that the RCO was wrong to identify the obvious, well-documented connections between CFMEU leadership, fascist sympathisers, and organised crime. For a group so intent on splitting the working class from its bureaucratic leadership, it is fascinating to see the Spartacists so keen on defending such a leadership from the most levelheaded and reasonable of criticisms. These affiliations are statements of fact and contributed to Labor's justification to place the CFMEU into administration. The notion that communists must demonstrate they have 'something to offer' the union struggle by uncritically backing the class-collaborationist leadership of the CFMEU is absurd, particularly given the RCO's clear call for an immediate defence of the CFMEU from the threat of administration.

The next three paragraphs of criticism leveled against the RCO reveal, once more, the central claim that the RCO failed to propose a "strategy to break the working class from their left Laborite misleaders." As luck would have it, the Spartacists themselves do propose such a strategy! How convenient for the communist left.

The truly problematic content here comes in the penultimate paragraph, in which the Spartacists (in troublingly vague terms) highlight how their "concrete path of action... struck a chord among broad layers of construction militants at different times because, while always guided by the final socialist goal, it was grounded at all times in a materialist appraisal of the shifting balance of contending class forces."

Ignoring the somewhat crude use of 'materialist' to simply describe 'understanding current events', it is only fair to ask; why did the Spartacists fail to prevent the administration of the CFMEU? If their program was so perfectly centred on breaking workers from "the death grip of their Laborite misleaders" what happened? Could it perhaps be that the Spartacists are not of an adequate size to effect immense, mass-political change? Could it perhaps be that for any intervention into something such as the Defend the CFMEU campaign beyond one aimed at recruiting sympathetic layers to be successful, it would have to be waged by a mass-mobilised, cohered left?

Yet if this were the case, it would endanger the entirety of the Spartacists' strategy – it would mean a shifting of tasks; a reorientation. If one believed that the crucial task was the formation of a communist party partly precisely in order to break the workers from Laborism, then perhaps one would be focused on the conscious construction of such a party. On the construction of such a party instead of say, on intervention as a singular sect in a sea of sects on a 'program' that really exemplifies a fetishised tactic into a movement far beyond the scope or ability of any such a sect. The work of the RCO is precisely this reunification of the communist left on a revolutionary program – the reconstruction of a communist party. Yes, Labor is one of the most significant roadblocks to workers power in Australia – yet some roadblocks are further along the road to power than others.

Attempts to go 'directly to the masses' – to organise a party on the basis of a single sect intervening into the class and the class alone, have failed historically and continue to fail every moment that Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance, Solidarity, the Spartacist League, Red Ant, Red Spark, the CPA, the ACP, and the RCO (to name but a few) continue to exist. We cannot hope to split workers en-masse without a communist party, without organising ourselves first, without clarifying our positions, priorities, and orientation through debate and discussion, and unifying based on a revolutionary program. ■

prepared to go after their own base to prove their subservience. In response, much of this base reacted in outrage and was looking for a (genuinely) working-class alternative. To call on workers to vote for Labor in this context was to do the union bureaucrats' job of dragging the working class

kicking and screaming back to the Labor government that had just betrayed them. To call to vote for the Greens was a call to direct working-class anger back into the hands of the liberals. Instead of being seen as an alternative, this strategy keeps the left discredited as little more than hangers-on to

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the liberal order that is kicking workers in the teeth—which ironically has paved the way for a Liberal/National government in Queensland and perhaps nationally.

It would be remiss if we did not address the central argument throughout Furia's article—why the hell does any of this matter without a revolutionary party? To argue this, he says: The SL/A's forces were too small to break the CFMEU base from its tops at that moment. The RCO is too small to really have an effect on the Queensland elections. The left is small, we can't split the class without a party. All true. But our difference with the RCO is not that we reject the centrality of the struggle for a revolutionary party. As Trotsky wrote of Lenin: "The struggle for the independent political party of the proletariat constituted the main content of his life." But it is precisely this fight, for the "conscious construction of such a party" as Furia says, that we believe the RCO rejects.

The RCO talks a lot about "refounding the communist party." How did Lenin forge them in the first place? In the wake of the betrayal of the Second International in WWI, Lenin fought tooth and nail for a *split* not just with the open traitors of the workers movement but most especially with the centrists who fought to maintain unity with the former at any cost. Centrists such as Karl Kautsky talked a big game on the fight for socialism, but sought unity on the basis of "mere words," in practice trying to "reconcile" the masses with their opportunist leaders. For all the principled demands in Kautsky's *Road to Power* (1909), without directly taking on the social-democratic roadblocks to this goal they would remain nothing more than words. Maintaining unity with these opportunists meant maintaining unity between the proletariat and "its own" capitalists—that is, submission to the latter and a split in the international revolutionary working class! In contrast, Lenin built the Bolshevik Party of revolutionary fighters and "iconoclasts" through an unrelenting, principled struggle against the Menshevik, social-democratic and centrist obstacles, not because he thought that at that moment he had the social forces to win, but because cohering and uniting the forces necessary to forge a mass revolutionary party could only be done on this basis! As Lenin put it in "Opportunism, and the Collapse of the Second International" (1915):

"We do not say that an immediate split with the opportunists in all countries is desirable, or even possible at present; we do say that such a split has come to a head, that it has become inevitable, is progressive in nature, and necessary to the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat, and that history, having turned away from 'peaceful' capitalism towards imperialism, has thereby turned towards such a split. *Volentem ducunt fata, nolentem trahunt.*"

This was the strategy that enabled Lenin to forge the Bolshevik Party and build the Communist International, which was united on the basis of struggling against the social-chauvinists and their conciliators. It is this, not abstract dogma or socialist phrases, which separates revolutionaries from all manner of *poseurs* and opportunists. As *Partisan!* editor Mila Volkova wrote: "...being a socialist is not a matter of self-identification, theoretical principles or vague aesthetics. To be a socialist is to be proactively committed to a revolutionary political program for working class rule and the transition to communism" (*Partisan!* No. 6). This means being *proactively* committed to the struggle against the central obstacles to this in the workers movement!

Of course, many things have changed 100 years on. Furia is right to say that today the left's social weight is pathetic, and that our capacity to intervene and change the course of class struggle is objectively limited by this. Like the RCO, we think that in this context it is of especial importance to engage with and cohere as many forces on the left as possible on a revolutionary basis. That struggle can only be waged in opposition to the Laborite obstacles standing in its way. It has been the left's failure to wage this struggle that has resulted in the weak and splintered miasma we see today. We ask, if not on this basis, on what basis does the RCO fight for unity? For all the high-sounding words in the RCO's program praising socialism and denouncing Labor, it means nothing if not based on struggling against, and in irreconcilable opposition to, the social-chauvinists and all who conciliate them. Otherwise it is little more than unity on the basis of "mere words." Yes, we need a communist party to split the class, but this party can only be built on the basis of fighting for this split. ■

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